

# Composting Yard Trimmings

## *Composting yard trimmings is the easiest step you can take to grow a healthier garden*

with less water, work, and waste. Making and using compost also helps keep local streams and lakes clean by filtering storm runoff, preventing erosion, and reducing the use of fertilizer and pesticides.

This guide describes simple ways to compost your yard trimmings. Other ways to recycle organic wastes at home are described in the *Composting Food Scraps, Mulch, and Lawns* guides.

### Choose a Composting Method That Works for You

**There are lots of ways to make good compost.**

The two basic "recipes" that follow can be used to make compost in piles or bins. Use the method that matches the time and effort you want to spend.

SLOW  
AND EASY  
COMPOST

**A no-fuss recipe that works by adding fresh trimmings in small amounts** to pile as they are picked up around the yard. Materials at the bottom of pile will be composted in 6-12 months.

**Ingredients:**  
Fresh "green" and woody "brown" yard trimmings, as available  
Water (hose with spray head or watering can)



#### Steps:

- 1 Put yard trimmings in bin or pile as picked up from yard. Cut or chop woody stalks. Mix and moisten dry materials as needed.
- 2 Cover with plastic, soil, or bin lid to keep moist.
- 3 Dig into pile occasionally. If materials that have been in the pile for a few months are not decomposing, check the "Compost Troubleshooting" chart that follows and make needed adjustments.
- 4 In 6 to 12 months, pull aside freshest trimmings on top to harvest the finished compost below. Return undecomposed materials to bin, moistening if needed.

## QUICK AND HOT COMPOST

### Ingredients:

Enough materials to make a 3' x 3' x 3' pile or to fill a bin.

- Several large wheelbarrows or trash cans of fresh "green" yard trimmings
- Several large wheelbarrows or trash cans of "brown" yard trimmings
- Water (hose with spray head)

A recipe made in large batches that are ready to use in 2-3 months.

### Steps:

- 1 Cut or shred woody stalks with a pruner, machete, shovel, lawn mower, or shredder.
- 2 Put roughly equal parts "greens" and "browns" on a tarp.
- 3 Spray materials with water and mix with garden fork until all glisten with moisture.
- 4 Load mix into bin or stack in pile. Repeat until bin is full or all materials are mixed.
- 5 Monitor the heat in middle of the pile using a compost thermometer or by touch. Turn pile when it has heated and starts to cool (5-7 days), placing materials from the outside edges into the middle of new pile. Moisten dry materials as turning. If pile has not heated up check "Compost Troubleshooting" chart.
- 6 Monitor and turn pile again in 5-7 days. Cover with plastic or carpet scrap and let age 4-8 weeks until dark and sweet smelling, like soil.

Leaf mulch and grass clippings



## Make a Pile— or Pick a Bin



**Piles** (above) are the simplest way to compost. However, open piles are easily disturbed by pets or pests, and may dry out—which stops composting.

**Turning Systems** (below) are designed for quick composting of large volumes. They can be a series of bins, or rotating barrels mounted on frames. A variety of barrel systems are offered by mail order suppliers.



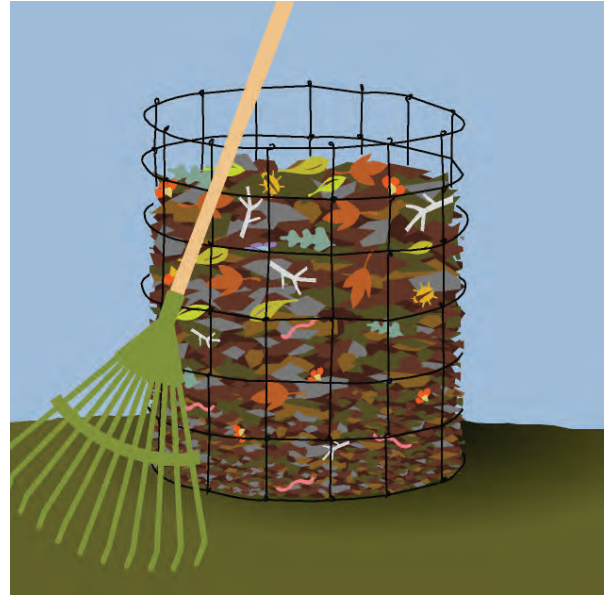
**Holding Bins** (next page, top) neatly contain composting materials, deter pests, and keep in moisture. Many types are available from stores and mail-order catalogs; or they can be made from wood pallets, hardware cloth, cement blocks, or other materials.



**Mulching and Grasscycling** (left) are also great ways to reuse yard trimmings. See the *Mulch* and *Lawns* guides for details.



Plastic holding bin



Wire holding bin

## Yard Waste Compost Troubleshooting

Symptoms	Cause	Solution
<b>Smells like</b> rotten eggs or garbage.	Pile too wet.	Turn pile and add dry stalks, leaves, or straw.
	Food or pet waste in pile.	Keep food scraps and pet waste out.
<b>Pile is dry</b> inside.	Not enough water.	Turn, moisten, and cover pile.
	Too much woody material.	Mix in greens or fertilizer. Chop or remove coarse woody materials.
	Pile too small.	Add greens and browns.
<b>Pile is damp</b> inside, but not composting.	Lack of greens.	Mix in greens or nitrogen fertilizer. Remove excess woody material.
<b>Pile has shrunk</b> , but looks undecomposed.	Outside of pile dry—inside may be composted.	Check in pile for finished compost. Use undecomposed material in new batch.
<b>Clumps of slimy grass</b> , ammonia smell.	Too much fresh grass.	Leave clippings on lawn, or mix in brown leaves or straw.





## A Diet for Quicker Compost

Naturally occurring bugs, microorganisms, and fungi will decompose yard trimmings left in the garden or placed in a compost pile—but may take a year or more. Helping these decomposers with an optimal diet can reduce composting time to just a few months.



**A Mix of "Greens" and "Browns."** Decomposers thrive on an equal mix of succulent "greens" like fresh grass clippings, weed leaves, and flowers; and woodier "browns" such as autumn leaves. Too many "greens" make a smelly mess. A pile that is too "brown" decomposes very slowly. Use the list of greens and browns that follows to create a healthy balance.

**Small Pieces.** Small bits decompose faster than large chunks. To speed composting, chop woody stalks and twigs with a shovel or machete, or run them over with a lawn mower or through a shredder.

**Ample Moisture.** Materials should be moist but not dripping wet—like a wrung out sponge. Spray and mix dry trimmings as they are added to a compost pile or when turning a dry pile. Compost in the shade and cover piles with plastic to hold moisture.

**Fresh Air.** If materials are too wet or compacted, composting will be slow and stinky. A good mix including some coarse stalks allows air into the pile. Turn soggy, smelly piles and mix in dry straw to let air in.

**Large Pile.** One cubic yard (3' tall, 3' wide and 3' long) is an ideal pile size. Smaller piles dry out quickly, though bins with solid sides help. Larger piles need to be turned often to let air into the middle.

## WHAT ABOUT . . . ?

**Do I need to add compost "starters," fertilizer, or limestone?** Nothing but yard trimmings is usually needed, though high nitrogen fertilizers such as blood meal or urea help if a pile has too many "browns."

**Should I add soil or finished compost?** A layer of soil or finished compost on top of a pile can help keep it moist, but is not necessary.

**Why can't I compost food scraps with yard trimmings?** Food scraps—especially meat, fish, and dairy products—create bad smells and attract rats, flies, dogs, raccoons, and other pests. The *Composting Food Scraps* guide explains safe ways to compost grains, fruits, and vegetable scraps using systems that contain odors and deter pests. Meat and other animal scraps should not be composted at home. Put these items in curbside green yard debris cart.

**What can I do if I mostly have grass clippings to compost?** The best option is to leave grass clippings on the lawn. See the *Lawn* guide for details. When you must collect grass clippings, spread them as a thin (1/2 inch) mulch on garden beds, or mix them with straw or brown leaves saved from autumn to compost.

**Can I compost pet wastes?** No! Dog, cat, and other pet feces can transmit diseases to people. Bag it and put into curbside gray garbage cart. Chicken, horse, and rabbit manures may be composted and are a good source of "greens."



# What Can Be Put in a Home Yard Waste Compost?



**Do Compost** in piles or bins.



**Do Not Compost** in piles or bins.

## Greens



Fresh grass clippings

Clippings recently treated with herbicide. Put in curbside green yard debris cart.

Fresh garden trimmings, flowers and plant leaves

Insect infested or diseased plants. Put in curbside green yard debris cart.

Barnyard manure (horse, cow, chicken, rabbit)

Pet Wastes—(dog, cat, rodent, exotic bird). Bag and put into curbside gray garbage cart.

Garden vegetable leaves and stalks

Food Scraps—meat, fish, poultry, dairy, fruit, cooked vegetables. Put these items into curbside green yard debris cart.

Weed leaves and flowers

Weed seed heads. Roots of spreading weeds like ivy, morning glory and quack grass. Put in curbside green yard debris cart.

House plants and potting mix

Insect infested or diseased plants. Put in curbside green yard debris cart.

## Browns



Autumn leaves

Large amounts of evergreen leaves. Put in curbside green yard debris cart.

Twigs and stalks

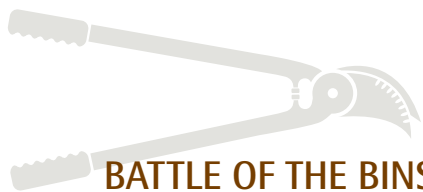
Branches over 1/2" diameter. Berry brambles and other thorny stems. Put in curbside green yard debris cart.

Sawdust or shavings

Sawdust from plywood, treated or painted wood. Put in curbside gray garbage cart.

Shredded paper, cardboard, paper towels

Glossy coated paper. Put in curbside blue recycling cart.



## BATTLE OF THE BINS: BACKYARD COMPOSTING VS. "CLEAN GREEN COLLECTION"

Why make and use your own compost when you can use Bellevue's convenient yard and food waste collection program and buy the finished Cedar Grove Compost at local stores? The information below will help you compare the benefits of both.

### Home Composting

Free compost!

No energy used to transport and process.

Cooler compost process may preserve nutrients and beneficial soil life.

Coarse materials in finished compost helps aerate soil.

Don't need to go to store to buy compost.

### Curbside Collection / Purchase Compost

Free bin, no work required!

Best for composting branches over 1/2 inch diameter and evergreen leaves.

Hot composting destroys weed seeds and roots.

Uniform, fine compost easy to spread and looks as good as mulch.

As much compost as you need, ready when you need it.



## RESOURCES

Bellevue's Natural Lawn and Garden website  
[www.bellevuewa.gov/naturalyardcare.htm](http://www.bellevuewa.gov/naturalyardcare.htm)

### Bellevue's Natural Gardening Guides

*Composting Food Scraps • Composting Yard Trimmings • Drip and Soak • Fertilizer • Garden Design • Lawn Alternatives • Lawns • Mulch • Pests, Weeds, and Diseases • Plant Right • Seasonal Calendar • Soil • Watering*  
**For copies,** visit Bellevue's Natural Lawn and Garden website (above) or call Bellevue Utilities at 425-452-6932.

**King County Solid Waste Division's composting website** <http://your.kingcounty.gov/solidwaste/naturalyardcare/compost.asp>

**King County Master Gardener Lake Hills Greenbelt Urban Demonstration Garden** at 15500 SE 16th Street, Bellevue.

**The Garden Hotline**  
[www.gardenhotline.org](http://www.gardenhotline.org) or 206-633-0224

**Natural Yard Care Neighborhoods**  
[www.naturalyardcare.info](http://www.naturalyardcare.info)

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